

Standards and Assessment Bulletin

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Field Notes

In-depth explorations of innovation in schools



Moving to a Math Specialist Model at Moretown Elementary

By Lisa Lovelette

Several weeks ago I had the pleasure of meeting with Roberta Barone who is the longtime - albeit retiring - principal of Moretown Elementary School. In September, Roberta's school shifted to a specialist model and she was very gracious in sharing her beliefs about the importance of this model for schools seeking improvements in mathematics, and the strategies she used to support her staff in making the shift. Although Moretown is a small, preK - 6, rural school of 143 students, the principles and strategies Roberta used to shift the culture in her school can be easily applied to schools of any size.

One of the first questions I posed to Roberta addressed what she felt was needed to improve mathematics instruction in our schools. Without a moment of hesitation, her answer was teachers who are passionate about teaching mathematics. As the conversation progressed, it quickly became evident that Roberta had used passion as the entry point into making the shift to a specialist model, recognizing that passion and expertise most often go hand in hand. One of the initial questions she presented to her staff as she began planting the seeds for the shift to a specialist model was, "Do you think it is important for kids to be taught by teachers who are passionate about the content they are teaching?" This may have seemed a loaded question, but Roberta's teachers could not dispute the importance of passion.

Roberta's next step was to hold a private conversation with each teacher on her staff to discuss personal teaching passions and strengths, acknowledging that it is unrealistic for elementary teachers to be strong in, and passionate about, every subject they teach. She closed each conversation by planting the seed that for decades our elementary schools have been built on the assumption that each elementary teacher is passionate and strong in their teaching of every subject, and that this may in fact be erroneous and a part of our culture we need to shift to improve learning for all kids. Over the following weeks, Roberta scoured the research for articles that focused on the specialist model and quietly placed them in teachers' mailboxes. As she reflected on her private conversations with each teacher, Roberta learned which teachers on her staff were most passionate about teaching mathematics...and those who were most passionate about teaching science, social studies, spelling and writing. The beginning of a specialist model was unfolding.

As the year was drawing to a close, Roberta held a group meeting with her teachers to discuss the specialist model research she had quietly shared over the previous weeks. She was quick to acknowledge that a move to a specialist model would be a change, and that change is difficult for even the most flexible person.

(continued on page 4)

Building Assessment Literacy

A focus on assessment design and interpretation of results



ACCESS: Assessing English Language Learners

Most people in Vermont are familiar with the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). The state assessment measures students' knowledge in reading, math, writing, and science every year. Schools' performance on the reading and math assessments determines Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the accountability system required by the federal No Child Left Behind act (NCLB).

But people might be less familiar with the *Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners* assessment, otherwise known as ACCESS for ELLs®. ACCESS is an assessment given to Vermont's English language learners (ELLs) each year to gauge their progress in attaining English proficiency. The ACCESS tests were developed in response to a lesser-known mandate of NCLB that requires states to "administer a standards-based English language proficiency test to all ELLs in kindergarten through grade twelve." To fulfill this obligation, Vermont reached out to other states and joined the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium, a non-profit partnership of 19 states (including New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine—partner states in NECAP) working collaboratively to meet the ELL/Title III requirements of NCLB. WIDA is based at the University of Wisconsin Center for Educational Research (WCER).

WIDA, in conjunction with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), and member states crafted the ACCESS assessments. According to WIDA, the instrument annually assesses ELLs for the purposes of measuring gains in English language proficiency and for holding districts and states accountable for meeting Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs). Unlike NECAP which has four achievement levels, ACCESS has six English language proficiency levels: Entering, Beginning, Developing, Expanding, Bridging, and Reaching.

Students who are learning to speak and use English in the classroom are working to master not only content skills (those measured by NECAP) but also the academic language proficiency necessary to communicate information, ideas and concepts required for academic success. In recognition of this, ACCESS assesses students' use of social language as well as language within the context of certain academic content areas. The test is based on five content area standards: social and instructional language (SI), which incorporates proficiencies needed to deal with the general language of the classroom and the school, English language arts (LA), math (MA), science (SC), and social studies (SS). For each of these five content areas, ACCESS assesses four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Vermont's ELL students do not participate in ACCESS *instead* of NECAP but take part in both. Only students who have recently arrived in the United States may be exempted from NECAP for their first year and only from the reading assessment. All ELL students must participate in ACCESS, regardless of when they arrived in the country. The testing window for ACCESS typically runs from mid-March to mid-April each spring. Schools receive their results in the summer.

Some Vermont districts were very pleased with their most recent batch of ACCESS scores. Linda Walsleben, ELL coordinator for the Burlington School District, said the ACCESS results indicated great growth and progress of their ELL students. Walsleben also reported that the scores help her district focus on areas where performance is more stagnant. As she explained, (these areas) "cause us to take a deeper look at what we're doing and what is necessary to move these students forward."

Jim McCobb, state ELL coordinator at the Vermont Department of Education, also believes that ACCESS is an important part of the state's assessment program. He also believes Vermont has been very fortunate to join a consortium (funded initially with a U.S. Department of Education Enhanced Assessment Grant) which possesses the collective expertise and resources necessary to develop the WIDA K-12 English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards and the ACCESS for ELLs® assessment. "One of the great benefits of belonging to WIDA," he says, "is that it provides valuable, practical, and user-friendly resources and opportunities for Vermont teachers, administrators, and parents to plan and improve educational programs for ELLs." He goes on to say that, "In addition to serving as the state's annual measure of ELLs' progress in acquiring the academic language skills appropriate for their grade level, this innovative, valid and reliable standards-based ELP assessment has helped Vermont schools to better understand the needs of ELLs and their educators and of the use of the standards as the foundation for instruction and assessment."

If you have any questions about ACCESS or ELL programs in Vermont, please contact the Department's ELL Coordinator, Jim McCobb at: (802) 828-0185 or james.mccobb@state.vt.us

For more information, see:

WIDA

<http://www.wida.us/>

ACCESS

<http://www.wida.us/assessment/ACCESS/index.aspx>

ELL programs and resources in Vermont:

http://www.education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_esl.html

From the Mailbag: Question of the Day



“How many ELL students do Vermont schools serve?”

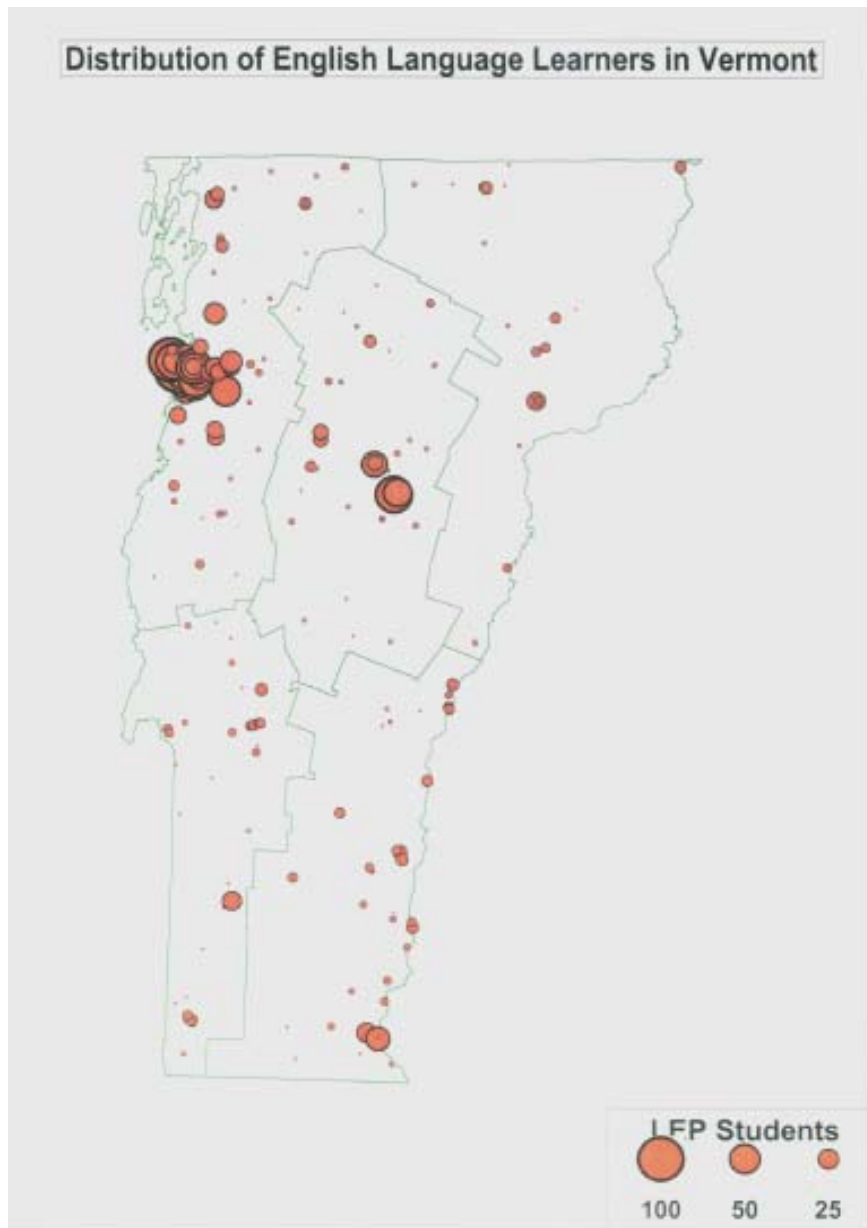
In the 2007-08 school year, there were approximately 1650 English-Language Learners in Vermont. From 1998-99 to 2007-08, the ELL enrollment in Vermont increased by 81 percent. Vermont ELL students speak over 90 languages and come from 97 countries on 6 continents. The map below illustrates where most ELL students attend school in Vermont.

*Have a question for the S&A team that you would like to see answered in this section?
Please contact Susan Hayes at 802-828-5892 or susan.hayes@state.vt.us*

Data Grab: Statistic of the Day



Distribution of ELL students in Vermont: 2007



At the same time, she reminded teachers that 30%-35% of Moretown's students are not gaining the skills in mathematics needed to be successful, so it was likely the school would have to do something significantly different to get a different result. Roberta continued to strategically focus on passion rather than expertise, and once again presented the question, "Do you believe it is important for kids to be taught by teachers who are passionate about the content they are teaching?"

Moretown's specialist model looks different than what I had envisioned prior to my conversation with Roberta. In grades 1-4, each of the four teachers is teaching the subject they are most passionate about to two classes, while each teacher teaches reading to his/her own students. In grades 1 and 2, one teacher teaches mathematics to both classes while the other teaches writing/spelling. In grades 3 and 4, one teacher teaches mathematics while the other teaches writing. In grades 5 and 6, one teacher teaches mathematics and science while the other teaches literacy and social studies. Although this is a dramatic shift in how they do business in Moretown, the change represents a small part of each teacher's time with students. Most importantly, however, each teacher has the opportunity to teach to his/her passion – and each child is being taught by a teacher who is passionate about teaching mathematics. Seems like a win-win...

Roberta was very quick to point out the importance of providing ongoing support to the teachers of mathematics. She believes teachers – even the most passionate – need consistent, high quality professional development to improve content knowledge and pedagogy, and that teachers of mathematics must be willing to open their doors to those who hold greater expertise. One day per month the teachers of mathematics meet as a team with an outside mathematics expert to discuss unit progress, student misconceptions, and weaknesses in the program. They select one concept each month – usually an area of difficulty for students – to explore in depth by examining student work from grades 1-6 while agreeing on adjustments in the program to address the difficulty. The expert also observes classes and provides individual and collective feedback to support teachers in improving their practice.

Moretown should be applauded for the bold steps they have taken to address the need to ensure high levels of learning in mathematics for all children. It is unrealistic to expect elementary teachers who are not passionate about mathematics and have not had significant content and pedagogy training to provide comprehensive and thorough learning experiences that ensure high levels of understanding for all kids. The lack of sufficient training for elementary teachers is a national issue most recently addressed in the Mathematics Panel Report. Moving towards a model that places the most passionate and highly trained teachers of mathematics in a specialist role represents a dramatic shift in our school culture, and a significant change in the structure of our schools. We are at a critical crossroads: we can either choose to be in front of this shift, or we can continue to do business as usual and hope for better results.

For further information or clarification, Roberta may be reached at rbaron@madriver.com or by phone at 496-3742. She has also graciously offered to host visitors if there is interest in seeing this model in action.

For more information on math specialists models, see:

National Math Panel Report

<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/mathpanel/report/teachers.pdf>

(*Pages 5-51 through 5-58 address the math specialist model and related research directly. Earlier sections discuss the link between content knowledge and student achievement.)

Research on math specialist model

<http://math.berkeley.edu/%7Ewu/Skywalkertalk.pdf>

Washington Post article about math specialists in D.C. area schools

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/05/AR2008110504776.html>

Odds and Ends...

A few things we thought you would appreciate knowing



Maine Joins NECAP Partnership

Maine has joined New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont as the fourth member of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), the first and only multi-state testing partnership formed in response to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Maine will join the other three member states in developing and administering the NECAP tests in reading, writing, and mathematics to all students in grades 3 through 8. With Maine as a member of the NECAP partnership, all states will benefit from a lower per pupil cost for the test administration. The addition of the expertise of Maine educators will allow the NECAP partner states to maintain the high quality of the NECAP tests, even in a time of diminishing funds. Maine, which has used Measured Progress to develop its own state tests, will use NECAP tests in Grades 3 through 8 only. At this time, Maine has not joined the NECAP partnership on science tests, which is managed through a separate contract with Measured Progress. The four states have agreed to discuss establishing a four-state partnership for the science test.

**For specific questions please contact Michael Hock, Director of Assessment
(828-3115, michael.hock@state.vt.us).**

Quote of the Day:

***"No issue is more pressing than education...It is the civil rights issue of our generation."
—Arne Duncan, Incoming Secretary, U.S. Department of Education***

Standards & Assessment Team

Gail Taylor, Director Standards and Assessment 828-5158 gail.taylor@state.vt.us	Mary Ann Minardo, Assessment Consultant 828-5410 maryann.minardo@state.vt.us	Michael Hock, Assessment Director 828-3115 michael.hock@state.vt.us
Rose Wheeler, Administrative Assistant 828-3114 rose.wheeler@state.vt.us	Geof Hewitt, Writing/Secondary English Consultant 828-3158 geof.hewitt@state.vt.us	Susan Hayes, NAEP Coordinator 828-5892 susan.hayes@state.vt.us
Nancy Hill, Program Services Clerk 828-3124 nancy.hill@state.vt.us	Pat Fitzsimmons, Co-Assistant Director Standards and Assessment 828-0196 pat.fitzsimmons@state.vt.us	Marty Gephart, Co-Assistant Director Standards and Assessment 828-1462 marty.gephart@state.vt.us
Lindy Johnson, Reading Assessment Coordinator 828-6562 lindy.johnson@state.vt.us	Noel Bryant, Enrichment Consultant 828-0215 noel.bryant@state.vt.us	Lisa Lovelette, Mathematics Consultant 828-0211 lisa.lovelette@state.vt.us
Gail Hall, Science Assessment Coordinator 828-0156 gail.hall@state.vt.us	Cindy Moran, Alternate Assessment Coordinator 828-0646 cindy.moran@state.vt.us	Tina Muncy, School Support Coordinator 828-1184 tina.muncy@state.vt.us
Gail Kilkelly, Arts and World Language Consultant 828-6560 gail.kilkelly@state.vt.us	Kathy Blanchard, School Support Workgroup Leader 828-5404 kathy.blanchard@state.vt.us	Peter Thoms, Policy Analyst 828-5104 peter.thoms@state.vt.us
Arlyn Brucoli, Education Technology Consultant 828-0223 arlyn.brucoli@state.vt.us	Jim McCobb, ELL Program Coordinator 828-0185 james.mccobb@state.vt.us	Steve Magill, Analysis & Data Mgmt. Director 828-6565 steve.magill@state.vt.us
Sigrid Lumbra, Social Studies Consultant 828-0200 sigrid.lumbra@state.vt.us	Elsie Penniman, Statistician 828-3148 elsie.penniman@state.vt.us	Helen Oatley, Secretary 828-5982 helen.oatley@state.vt.us
Greg Wylde, Alternate Assessment Coordinator 828-1338 greg.wylde@state.vt.us	Nancy Lewis, Statistician 828-0277 nancy.lewis@state.vt.us	Kathy Renfrew, Elementary Mathematics & Science Assessment Coordinator 828-6561 kathy.renfrew@state.vt.us
Pat Johnson, School Support Coordinator 828-5124 pat.johnson@state.vt.us	Denise Maurice, Secondary Mathematics Assessment Coordinator 828-2173 denise.maurice@state.vt.us	